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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 002476

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KPAL IS QA EG

SUBJECT: HAJ PILGRIMS IN GAZA; GOE AWAITING HUMANITARIAN AID; DEMONSTRATIONS INCREASE

REF: A. CAIRO 2429

1B. CAIRO 3498 (2007)

1C. CAIRO 2438

Classified By: MINISTER COUNSELOR WILLIAM R. STEWART
REASONS: 1.4 (B) and (D)

11. (C) Summary. The GOE has opened Rafah crossing for approximately 3100 inbound Haj pilgrims (reftel a), but the MFA reports that Hamas continues to block movement of the pilgrims inside Gaza, and that so far none have crossed into Egypt. The GOE is increasing public criticism of Hamas over the Haj impasse, as well as for the stalled intra-Palestinian reconciliation talks. Pro-Palestinian demonstrations on college campuses and outside mosques throughout Egypt have sprung up over the past ten days, with approximately 60,000 total participants. These demonstrations have mostly been organized by the Muslim Brotherhood. End summary.

12. (C) MFA Deputy Director for Palestinian Affairs Barakat Leithy told us December 4 that although Rafah crossing has been open for five days to allow for Haj pilgrims, so far none have entered Egypt. Busses are standing by at Rafah to transport the pilgrims to the coastal town of Nuweiba, where the pilgrims will take ferries to Saudi Arabia. Leithy said that Hamas is currently blocking 3100 pilgrims with valid Saudi Arabian visas because these pilgrims are sponsored by the Palestinian Authority, whereas other pilgrims, sponsored by Hamas, have had their visa applications denied by Saudi Arabia. Leithy noted that the Saudi Arabian government has made clear that non-visa holders will not be allowed to make the Haj.

13. (C) Leithy acknowledged that this is an extremely sensitive matter, and that the Egyptian public will look very unfavorably on any party that is perceived to have blocked Haj pilgrims. To that end, he said that the GOE is stepping up its effort to ensure the Egyptian public does not blame the GOE, but rather Hamas, for the current situation. However, he worried that Hamas, or perhaps domestic opposition, may be able to publicly spin the issue against the GOE. Grand Mufti Tantawi took an implicit swipe at Hamas on December 3, saying that "whoever prohibits a Muslim from performing the duty of pilgrimage commits an atrocious crime." On December 4, the Egyptian Cabinet issued a statement blaming the "Palestinian leadership" for the humanitarian situation in Gaza as well as the blockage of Haj pilgrims; the statement continued that "Egypt rejects lies about its role toward the Palestinian cause."

14. (SBU) With respect to the November 26 Arab League resolution calling for Arab states to coordinate shipments of humanitarian supplies to Gaza with Egypt and Jordan (reftel c), Leithy said that as of December 4, no shipments have been received. He noted media reports that the Qataris were planning to send a ship with humanitarian supplies, but had no further information.

¶ 15. (C) Leithy did not know when the next intra-Palestinian reconciliation meeting would be hosted by the Egyptians, but was not optimistic that it would happen in the coming weeks, given Hamas' current posture. Egyptian FM Aboul Gheit told local newspaper al Ahram December 3 that Egyptian efforts for Palestinian reconciliation have been frustrated by Hamas, lack of enthusiasm.

¶ 16. (SBU) Meanwhile, for the first time in over a year, there has been a series of pro-Palestinian demonstrations, specifically against the "Gaza siege," on college campuses and at mosques throughout Egypt. Most of these demonstrations have reportedly been organized by the Muslim Brotherhood, with the liberal "April 6" movement, Labor Party and Nasserite students joining in. According to media reports, an approximate total of 60,000 Egyptians participated in these demonstrations from November 24 to December 4. Dozens of students have been injured in clashes with police. On December 4, approximately 60 MB members were arrested in connection with the demonstrations, according to a media report.

¶ 17. (C) Comment. The Egyptians maintained control of the (albeit stalled) intra-Palestinian reconciliation process and solidified Arab support for Abbas at the November 26 Arab League ministerial, notwithstanding a rough three week period that included a flare-up in Hamas rocket launches, Israeli closure of crossings into Gaza, and the issue of Haj pilgrims. Over the past year, we have observed a decline in attention to the Palestinian issue relative to domestic economic and political concerns, especially among young people (reftel b). However, the recent demonstrations

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indicate that Egyptians can be mobilized quickly to demonstrate for the Palestinian cause, especially when Gaza humanitarian conditions come into public focus.

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